

## Keith Mehlin: Behind the Badge 08/03/2003

Last night while I was perusing my latest Cabelas catalog, dreaming about things that I can't afford to buy, I had the TV on, tuned to one of those crime scene investigator shows.

I don't know which one it was - I think that there are two on now - and I don't know what the plot was. I do know that it has to be one of the most far-fetched shows on TV, other than one of these really dumb shows where someone is supposed to marry a stranger.

While I have never watched one of the CSI shows start to finish and really paid attention to it, I have seen enough to know that the premises is a small group of people who are apparently scientists/police officers that do the crime scene work on a major police department.

It appears that these people do it all. Crime scene work, evidence analysis, crime scene reconstruction, witness and suspect interrogation, make coffee, arrests and clean the building, all in a single shift.

They are apparently well versed in all aspects of forensic evidence, including chemistry, DNA, physics, photography, ballistics, forensic pathology, forensic dentistry, explosives, tool marks, fingerprinting, nuclear physics, Martha Stewart recipes and every other possible discipline imagined.

They work day and night, with apparently no time off. They never sleep, eat, or have any interests other than work. The one thing they also never seem to do is testify in court on how they solved the latest homicide.

In the private sector they would all probably be multiple Nobel Prize winners.

It also looks like they only work homicides. I don't know who does the forensic work on the other crimes that the department handles. Maybe they just ignore them, or maybe that work is done by someone else.

Whatever the case, the people portrayed on the show are way too busy with murders to bother with run of the mill robberies or burglaries.

I also like the workplace that these people find themselves in. It is apparently a full blown lab with every piece of equipment provided that they would ever need.

I doubt that any of the actors on the show have ever said, "Gee, I wish we had this thing-of-a-majig, so we could do this test. Maybe we could borrow it from the Council Bluffs Police Department."

They seem to have it all. I don't know if it is housed in a building, or a floor in a building, but I can see that it is quite impressive. The one thing I am worried about is that they always seem to be working in the dark. They must be worried about the light bill.

I really don't know if any of the major cities in this country have people and labs such as are portrayed on this TV show. I really doubt it.

I do know that the medium to small agencies in the United States have nothing even close to the lab on CSI. I have often joked that the people on these shows are stuck with their multi-million-dollar laboratories, while our people are stuck with their multi-hundred dollar lab.

While the equipment is not comparable, the dedication to duty is. At least on our department our crime scene people are very dedicated to their duty, and to the never ending job of training and schooling needed to keep up with the latest evidence and crime scene techniques.

Karen Foreman and Alyssa Peterson, our crime scene investigators, do work all hours of the day and night, not because they want to but because it's part of their job.

They are also extremely educated and smart and are always seeking more training for their job. They do not work in the dark; we provide them lights and are not worried about the light bill, at least not yet.

They do not have a multi-million dollar lab to work in. Their lab was, before we converted it, a closet - and not even a big closet.

They have some equipment to work with, but nothing in comparison to the TV show. They wish they had it, but they make do very well with what they have.

I am sure they also wish they made the salary that the make-believe crime scene investigators make.

The show CSI portrays crime scene work as glamorous. It is not. It is often tedious, always time consuming, often dirty and disgusting and always stressful. It is also one of the most important jobs on any police department.

Have fun watching the TV show, but remember that real life and TV have nothing in common.

Keith Mehlin is chief of the Council Bluffs Police Department